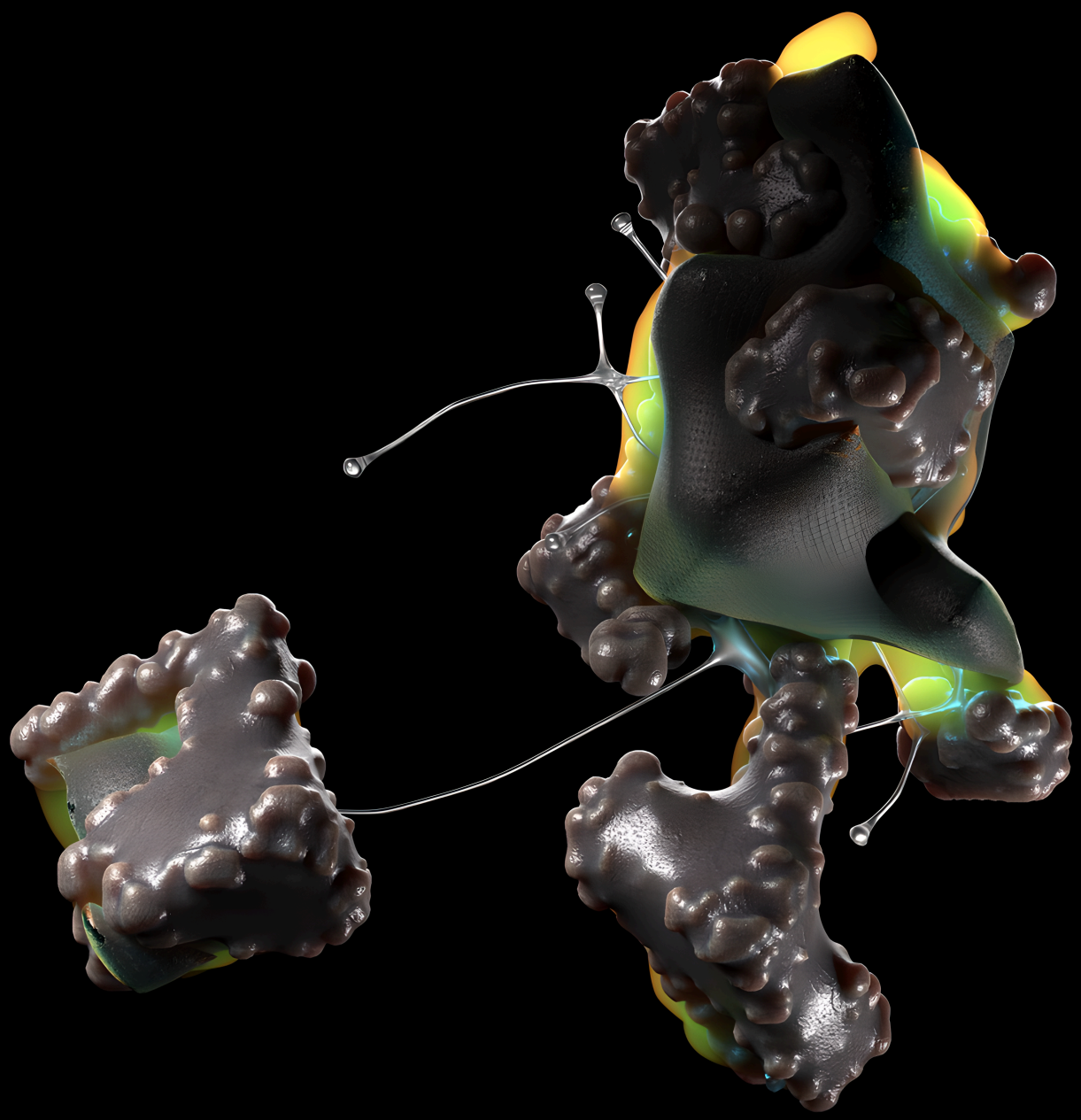

12/18/2025

# Xenology: Beyond “Cyberpositive” // Vit Bohal

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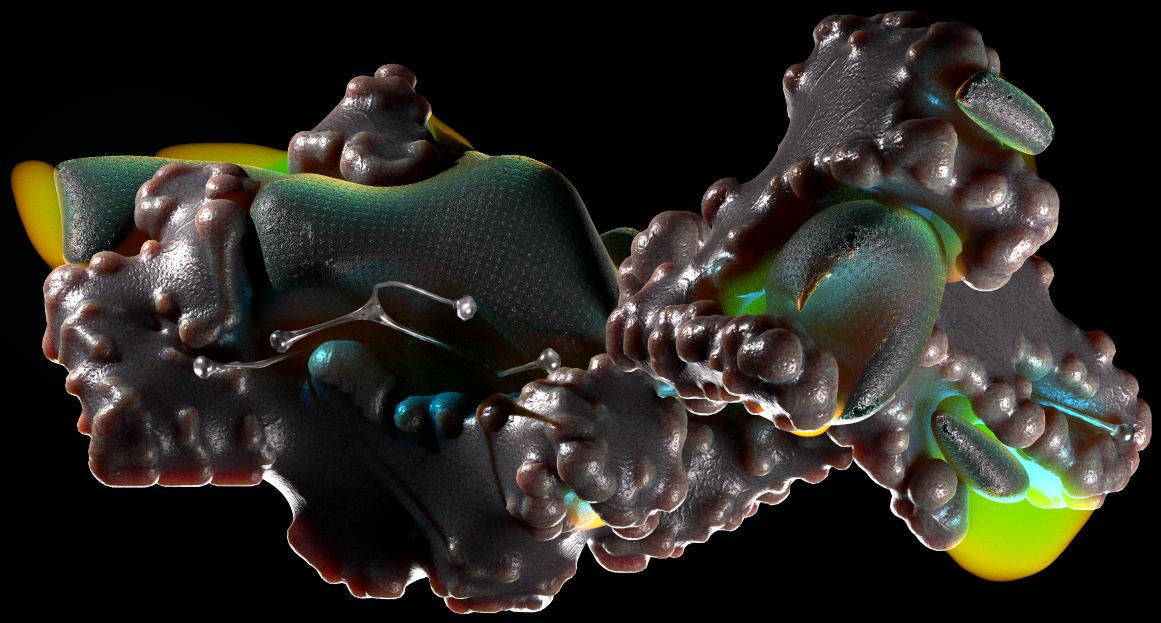
The original founder and force behind the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (Ccru) was theorist Sadie Plant, who in 1995 proposed the Unit as a module which would explore the overlaps of feminism and cybernetics under the auspices of Warwick University Department of Philosophy. After Plant left academia soon thereafter, Nick Land took over the directorship and forked from Plant's original vision.[1] But before this departure, Plant and Land co-authored the seminal essay "Cyberpositive" (1994) in which they together explore the potentialities of digital culture and digital technology upon the backdrop of cybernetic theory.

"Cyberpositive" remains the only published co-authored text of Sadie Plant and Nick Land and provides a stark exposition of the western zeitgeist for the digital 1990s, a point when private capital and the increasing distribution of cybernetic technologies were developing into a pervasive and widely distributed culture. The optimism generated by the perceived liberalization and deterritorialization of information exchange and its promise for the libidinal economies of the post-Cold War West also became a hot topic for the then-contemporary western anglophone philosophy, with the para-academic Ccru being one of the most exuberant projects working the post-cybernetic landscape.



Lukáš Prokop, IG:h5io6i54k.

Being written before the first “dotcom” crash and the beginnings of the reterritorialization of the internet at the hands of various sector-specific monopolies and state actors, “Cyberpositive” communicates the optimism of a terra nova of cybernetic ‘space’ which opened up with the new affordances of the then-nascent digital technologies. Simon Reynolds considers the text “a gauntlet thrown down at the Left-wing orthodoxies that still dominate British academia,”[2] writing that:

“The term ‘cyberpositive’ was a twist on Norbert Wiener’s ideas of ‘negative feedback’ (homeostasis), and ‘positive feedback’ (runaway tendencies, vicious circles). Where the conservative Wiener valorized ‘negative feedback’, Plant/Land repositivized positive

feedback – specifically, the tendency of market forces to generate disorder and destabilise control structures."[3]

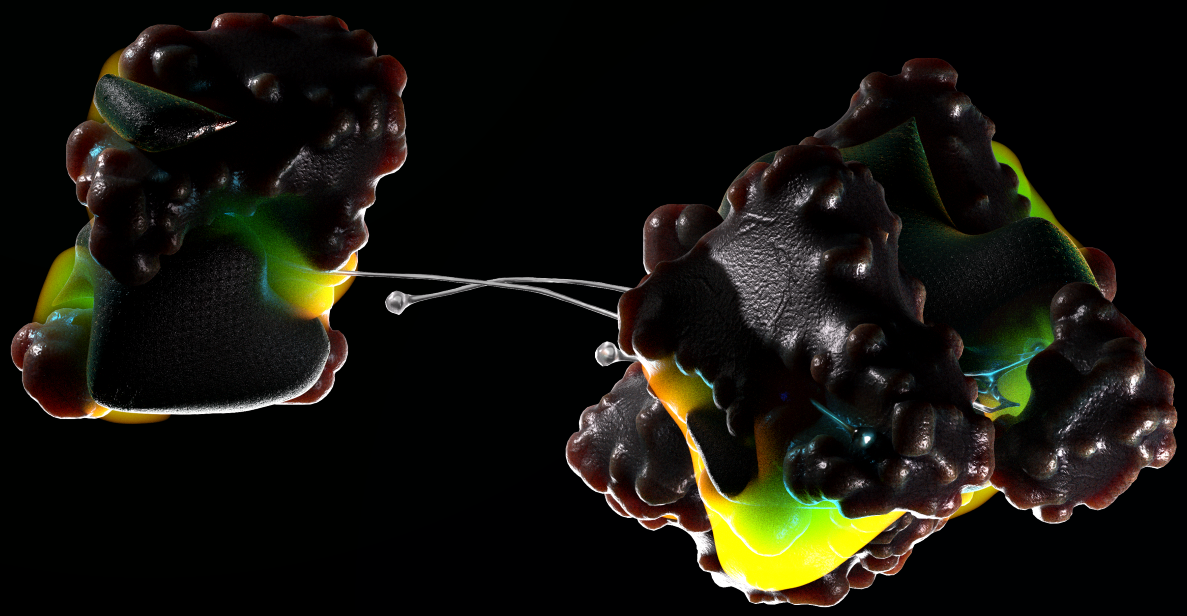
To remain a while longer with the work of Nick Land, we may see the explicit valorization of positive feedback within cybernetic culture in his later formulation of "accelerationism," which has continued to bear influence on the philosophy and political theory of the first decades of the 21st century. Land finds a central principle for his accelerationist celebration of positive feedback and emancipatory breakdown in a passage from Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* (1972), where the authors write:

"For perhaps the [libidinal] flows are not yet deterritorialized enough, not decoded enough, from the viewpoint of a theory and a practice of a highly schizophrenic character. Not to withdraw from the process, but to go further, to "accelerate the process," as Nietzsche put it: in this matter, the truth is that we haven't seen anything yet." [4]

In Land's cyber theory, this call to "accelerate the process" is analogous to Deleuze's call to deterritorialize libidinal flows, but is here remediated for the digital era, finding its medium in the nascent infrastructures of digital capitalism. Land in this regard philosophizes a rift between legacy state systems (predicated on a homeostatic tendency towards "security" and negative feedback) and the liberal promise of post-cybernetic entrepreneurship (that is the cyber-positive forces of 1990s digital capital).[5] His work during and after heading the Ccru updates the maxim of positive feedback as a categorical imperative for liberalism, one which overwrites the state and polis in favor of what can be termed a 'machinic technocracy,' or what has, in recent years, been described as the pervasive political threat of an exacerbated "technofeudalism."[6] It remains blatantly paradoxical that the technological deterritorialization which Land courted in his early work in fact becomes incrementally outed as a force of reterritorialization at the hands of various security-driven hegemons; a "Neo-China arriv[ing] from the future," as he writes in his text "Meltdown."[7]

Land spends much of the 1990s and onward envisioning a world of accelerating positive feedback which, in our current era of runaway climate change, digital capital and social migration, was partly undoubtedly prescient, but Land has also more recently become the herald of a neo-reactionary, technocratic determinism. We see this, for example, in his series of posts called *The Dark Enlightenment (2012),* where he critiques modernity and shows a dislike for democracy. The work has directly influenced the wider Neo-Reactionary movement and its corporate-fascist politics.[8]

Sadie Plant's approach and frame of philosophical reference was, however, significantly different from that of Land. In the years leading up to and since the Ccru's original founding, Plant was instrumental in the framing of cyberfeminism, originally proposing the Ccru as a collective for studying the relations between cybernetic culture and feminism. This is a central point of divergence between the two thinkers, one which gives insight into the position of the xeno as it was formed under the auspices of the Ccru, and which undoubtedly constitutes one of the fundamental sources for the semantics and grammatology of the xeno today.



Following cultural theorist Jules Joanne Gleeson, we can say that "Ccru collaborator Sadie Plant [...] (unlike Land) remains widely respected in cultural theory."[9] This statement in itself merits a reappraisal of "Cyberpositive," one of the earliest texts of the

Ccru (originally formulated in 1992)[10] and coauthored by the two heads of the Ccru hydra. For the particular purposes of comparative xenology, I would like to focus on a brief passage which comes to prefigure some of the later approaches to the questions of terrestriality and alienation within the philosophy of posthumanism (particularly as expressed in the work of the xenofeminist Laboria Cuboniks collective). Land and Plant write:

"Security cybernetics has supplanted the critique of alienation, the great motif of humanist economics, which had long become an increasingly futile search for the source of corporate control. Alienation used to diagnose the condition of a population becoming foreign to itself, offering a prognosis that still promised recovery. All that is over. We are all foreigners now, no longer alienated but alien, merely duped into crumbling allegiance with entropic traditions.

To what could we wish to return? Heidegger completed the degeneration of authenticity into xenocidal neurosis. Being died in the fuhrerbunker, and purity belongs entirely to the cops. The capitalist metropolis is mutating beyond all nostalgia. If the schizoid children of modernity are alienated, it is not as survivors from a pastoral past, but as explorers of an impending posthumanity."[11]

Plant and Land are philosophizing a moment which is directly analogous to the shift in the signification of the xeno from its classical framings towards the post-cybernetic condition of cyber-positivity. In navigating the line of flight of digital capital, they identify their contemporary situation as one of crisis brought about by social, technical and epistemic acceleration and transformation, and identify alienation as the central vector which moves traditional philosophies of Being to those of becoming, exploding as the zeitgeist of the post-cybernetic era. the gradual dismantling of the modernist subject and the impossibility of its "return," Land and Plant offer a "cyberpositive" project in its place, one which might become liberated from the forces of security and their "xenocidal neurosis."

Martin Heidegger famously considered cybernetization as a fundamental cause in the proclaimed "end of philosophy;" a new epistemology which comes to overwrite the classical vocabularies of phenomenology and metaphysics in favor of the technical and procedural cooptation of 'thinking' as such.[12] For Land and Plant, Heidegger's philosophy of technics "completed the degeneration of authenticity," which structures the 'human security system' as a keeper of order and purity. Against this classical and conservative tradition of philosophical thought, which is for them based in

ressentiment, Land and Plant posit the liberal forces of a post-cybernetic sensibility predicated on positive feedback. They celebrate the acceleration beyond the mandate of control-based state systems and philosophize their escape velocity, potential lines of flight, and their impact on formulating the future.

"Cyberpositive" has, along with much of the subsequent work of the Ccru, provided a conception of exit from cultural and philosophical inertia, exploring the "impending post-humanity" within a post-cybernetic context. And although both writers have since developed their thought in vastly different directions, "Cyberpositive" sheds light on the original state of cyber-philosophy as practiced by the Ccru in the early 1990s. The resonances with Land's later accelerationism are palpable and retrospectively situate accelerationism not so much as a critical gesture (commonly assumed to consist in "accelerating capitalism to its destruction"[13]) but rather as a hysterical response to the problem of the corroding and dissipating self-image of the human as mediated via a newly minted technoeconomic sector.

But where Land's cyberpositivity adopted a largely explicit anti-humanist position, Plant's stake in cyberpositivity rather opened the philosophical margins to a posthumanism growing out of social and materialist theory and practice. Plant's work prefigures a philosophical vector which has come to engage with a vast segment of contemporary thought (i.e. cyberfeminism, new materialism, social feminism, contemporary Science and Technology Studies) and her approach to cybernetics in this sense constitutes an "exit through the deep" (Land) of its own. Such an 'exit' is one which does not fetishize a transcendent outsideness beyond the mandate of social ethics. It rather embraces construction as an integral component of social relations and their material conditions constitute. It in this sense engages with the emergent and historically contingent palimpsest of traces which manifestly structure the contemporary situation.[14]

Such a gesture thus exceeds theories focusing on the technocratic systems of 'societies of control,' which right-accelerationism has since come to perversely critique from the inside, and rather develops post-cybernetic thought towards the plane of 'planetarity' in which the planetary situation is constructed as a site of integral sociality (discussed at length in Part II of *Xenology*, particularly in relation to xenoplanetarity).

The planetary connection between material existence and the integral sociality of both bios and human culture is for example proposed in the opening of Plant's *Zeroes + Ones: Digital Women + The New Technoculture* [15] first published in 1997, where Plant

gives an account of the first bacteria which appeared in the Archean Eon [16] period of Earth's history.

"Those were the days, when we were all at sea. It seems like yesterday to me. Species, sex, race, class: in those days none of this meant anything at all. No parents, no children, just ourselves, strings of inseparable sisters, warm and wet, indistinguishable one from the other, gloriously indiscriminate, promiscuous and fused. No generations. No future, no past. An endless geographic plane of micromeshing pulsing quanta, limitless webs of interacting blendings, leakings, mergings, weaving through ourselves, running rings around each other, heedless, needless, aimless, careless, thoughtless, amok."[17]

The above quote expresses a poetic core of Plant's approach to otherness, being at the same time aesthetic, feminist, materialist and xenophilic. In other words, it does not hijack the xeno away from its fundamentally biological and social register towards a paranoid transcendentalism, but rather expands it for a posthuman politics which remains tuned to the biotic existence of the planet. Such a synthetic politics of mutual becoming are constructed not as a liberal and individualist project, i.e. as a 'technology of the self' commensurate with capitalist entrainment, but rather as a synthesis, that is a "being placed together" in the becoming-with of planetary-social relations.[18] Plant's cyberpositive attitude understood the new cyberspace as a space of connectivity, homogeneity and universality, and Plant saw cybernetic culture as similarly connectionist, nonhierarchical and responsive – "An endless geographic plane of micromeshing pulsing quanta, limitless webs of interacting blendings, leakings, mergings."

In 1997, Sadie Plant left the University of Warwick and Nick Land took over the directorship of the Ccru. This was also the year that her work *Zeroes + Ones* was published and has since become one of the seminal texts for the construction of cyberfeminism. In exuberant prose, the book documented the legacy of women in cybernetics and programming, from Ada Lovelace to the operators of the ENIAC computer,[19] and explored forgotten or disregarded material histories through a deft speculative lens. The contemporary press lauded it as "a brilliant and terrifically sustained cyberfeminist rant" and "the best and most original book on the history and implications of ubiquitous computation."[20]

It is notable that Plant's book also references the work of American science fiction writer Octavia Butler, particularly her *Xenogenesis* trilogy.[21] And indeed, Butler has

become a central literary source for subsequent feminist critiques of technology and speculative sociology. Butler's later work (i.e. the *Xenogenesis* trilogy and the incomplete *Earthseed* trilogy) have come to be regarded as central sources for the theorization of the xeno,[22]particularly for theorists and artists such as Diann Bauer, Patricia Reed, Luciana Parisi, Antonia Majaca or Armen Avanessian.[23]

The *Xenogenesis* trilogy, since published under the title *Lilith's Brood*, follows the fate of Lilith, a human woman abducted by the Oankali, who are an ambivalently benign, spacefaring civilization of extraterrestrials. The Oankali are able to store and graft genetic code from myriad cosmic species, with genetic information being a medium which they have learned to store, manipulate, and gestate across the cosmos. The race happens to find the human capacity for mutation, particularly its cancerous growth, a tremendous evolutionary force, and one they plan to harness. The plot of the *Xenogenesis* trilogy indexes a fascinating matrix of cosmic horror and "origin story,"[24] navigating questions of strangeness and alienation through a speculative narrative exploring xenobiology, hybridity, and kinship.[25] Evolutionary biohacking constitutes one of its fundamental tropes, and the plot essentially casts *zoe* (i.e. the biological substrate of all living matter) as a technological stratum sustaining all sectors of the alien Oankali civilization, from sex and reproduction,[26] to shipbuilding and architecture.

The turn toward the planetary scale and the particular need to make Earth a livable site is symptomatic of the posthuman turn in Butler's work. Here, the xeno engages not only with the figural strangeness of the figural *xenos* as a classic sci-fi trope of otherness and xenotic kinship (i.e. the Oankali bodies which, through advanced breeding practices, change the gene pool of their cosmic others),[27] but expands the figural tropes for the procedural layer in navigating kinship protocols which span the inhuman envelope of the planet and the wider cosmos.

In its excavation and working through of the material damage and debris of the planet, Butler's work formulates a type of cosmic fragility and precarity. Yet this perspective differs from that of the paranoiac mindset – for her, the existence of life is integrally adaptable, synthetic and contingent, and she builds her implicit philosophy from such a socially engaged ground. Butler's work has in this regard been influential in developing the question of the xeno not only within its classical figural/procedural split (i.e. the classical modes of the xeno as expressed in *xenos* and *xenia*), but in a speculative approach to inhuman rationality. She navigates questions of mutation and biohacking within the context of a planetary-scale trace theory, yet never loses sight of the focalizing presence of the social conditions of the lived experience. It is in this way that

the xeno expands towards an explicitly posthuman register, insofar as it engages with the material bios of the planet while (in true literary fashion) retaining humanity as an irreducible vantage point.

This pressing insistence on the relevancy of its life and its mutual enmeshment in complex interactions, stretching through the inhuman temporality of geological and cosmic time, can be said to adopt the position of a strategic anthropocentrism, but one which moves beyond the signifier of the human in favor of expanding sociality beyond the marks of race and species, expanding into the cosmos. The position of humanity is thus made malleable and open to reconsideration – it becomes more than an early modern, enlightened trope in need of erasure, but rather one which must be engaged in constant and progressive revision without losing sight of its own strategic relevancies (see the chapter on the inhuman).

This is commensurate with a significant sidestep from cyberpositivity. Where the xeno of cyberpositivity is predicated on lines of flight towards an intimated transcendent signifier (whether as runaway techné, or as the nativist, fascist imaginarium), Butler's and Plant's thematization of reproduction beyond an androcentric register tends towards a xeno commensurate with a conservative progressivism which reclaims the vision of social politics as an originary and (inter)planetary condition. For both Plant and Butler, humanity serves as a departure point providing a view onto the posthuman landscape – one which is not de-peopled by the machines of acceleration, but rather integrally oriented towards an expansive conception of society as a shared mechanism of biological resilience and survival in which competition and collaboration, hospitality and hostility, predation and symbiosis, commensalism and indifference are always in intimate proximity and co-generative of shared realities, indicating the integral robustness and relevance of the social sphere.

Although the xeno skirts the line of accelerationism as a historical vestige, this short foray into the contemporary situation of its abduction shows it as continually viable into the future. The xeno can in this sense be employed to constitute a social core existing beyond the paranoid "ehtnostates" of "patchworks" of the neo-reactionary (NRx) imaginaries, in favor of navigating the shared alienation the contemporary (more-than-)human subjects.

The map is not the territory.

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2. Reynolds, “RENEGADE ACADEMIA.”

3. Reynolds, “RENEGADE ACADEMIA.”

4. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Anti-Oedipus (Bloomsbury, 2012), 276.

5. Land in this sense prefigures the topical discussion of the relationship and mandate of state actors in relation to large players of techno-capital (like MAGMA, i.e. Microsoft, Amazon, Google, Meta, Apple) which have adopted the model of what Nick Srnicek has called “platform capitalism,” and which Shoshana Zuboff has associated with “surveillance capitalism.” See Nick Srnicek, Platform Capitalism (polity, 2017); Shoshana Zuboff, Surveillance Capitalism (Great Britain: Profile Books, 2019).

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13. Such a view has been discussed and critiqued by, for example, Slavoj Žižek in “Slavoj Zizek on Accelerationism,” Not Actually channel, Youtube, published 31 March 2019, accessed 4 June 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=432g97vs6s0; or Steven Shaviro in the chapter “Introduction to Accelerationism” in No Speed Limit: Three Essays on Accelerationism (University of Minnesota Press, 2015), available online at https://manifold.umn.edu/projects/no-speed-limit, accessed 4 June 2023.

14. The question of a posthuman grammatology is wonderfully explored in Laurent Milesi’s three-part series “Derrida and Posthumanism” (Part I: From Sign to trace, Part II: The Animality of the Trace, Part III: The Technicity of the Trace), see Laurent Milesi, “Derrida and Posthumanism,” Critical Posthumanism (2020), accessed 4 June 2023, https://criticalposthumanism.net/author/laurent-milesi/.

15. Sadie Plant, Zeroes + Ones: Digital Women and the New Technoculture (London: Fourth Estate, 1997)

16. Or, by other accounts, Pre-Cambrian era, see ‘Bacteria,’ Encyclopedia Brittanica, accessed 4 June 2023, https://www.britannica.com/science/ bacteria/Evolution-of-bacteria.

17. Sadie Plant, Zeroes + Ones, 7 [e-pub].

18. Vít Bohal, “Synthetic Becoming: Life in the Molecular Commons,”Makery (1 March 2023), accessed 4 June 2023, https://www.makery.info/en/2023/03/01/english-synthetic-becoming-life-in-themolecular-commons/; Lenka Veselá, ed., Synthetic Becoming (Litomyšl: K. Verlag and Brno FaVU, 2022).

19. Plant for example provides one of the most influential accounts of the role Lady Ada Lovelace played in drafting the program made for Charles Babbage’s Analytical Engine, finding the first programming technology in the technology of the Jacquard loom. Such accounts have become canonical for the study of ‘cyberfeminism,’ a term which Sadie Plant coined and developed (along with other artists and thinkers such as VNS Matrix collective, Judy Wajcman, or the Old Boys Network).

20. "A Loom with A View," Irish Times (9 October 1997), accessed 4 June 2023, https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/a-loom-with-a-view-1.113972.

21. Plant, Zeroes + Ones, 220.

22. Butler's work is referenced for example in Luciana Parisi's concept of "xenopatterning," or what she calls "alien image-model" which compute futurological patterns by making recourse to abductive logic and by embracing speculation as a non-deterministic vector for constructing the future. Similarly, the members of the Laboria Cuboniks xenofeminist collective consider Butler's use of the 'xeno' morpheme to be a fundamental source for the 'xeno-' of xenofeminism. See Robert Barry, "Doing Gender: Helen Hester on Xenofeminism," interview, The Quietus (31 March 2018), accessed 4 June 2023, https://thequietus.com/articles/24298-xenofeminism-helen-hester-interview.

23. See for example Diann Bauer, Xenogenesis, Treignac Project, exhibition (Treignac: 3 June – 16 July 2017), accessed 4 June 2023, https://treignacprojet.org/exhibitions/xenogenesis/; Luciana Parisi, "Xeno-patterning: Predictive Intuition and Automated Imagination" Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities, vol. 24, no. 1 (2019), 81-97; Antonia Majaca and Luciana Parisi, "The Incomputable and Instrumental Possibility," e-flux, no. 77 (November 2016), accessed 4 June, 2023, https://www.e-flux.com/journal/77/76322/theincomputable-and-instrumental-possibility/.

24. Cathy Peppers, "Dialogic Origins and Alien Identities in Butler's Xenogenesis," Science Fiction Studies, vol. 22, no. 1 (March 1995), 47-62.

25. But the need to feed living systems here also indexes the wider planetary scale, as the ETs ultimately aim to consume the entire Earth in order to draw bio-fuel for their further cosmic wanderings, as they had always done in the past. In the series' third book, Imago, this plan is disrupted through the actions of Jodahs, who sci-fi theorist John Folk-Williams believes to be a conduit for a new way of life which enables "the seeds of new settlements to take root in the earth so that the planet can thrive in a new way." [John Folk-Williams, "Octavia E. Butler's Xenogenesis Trilogy: A New Species Emerges," SciFi Mind (last update 2023), accessed 4 June 2023, https://www.scifimind.com/octavia-ebutlers-xenogenesis-trilogy-new-species/.%5D Jodahs is developed as a strange messiah who opens the path for a new species of human, one which would be able to avoid the caveats of the drive to destruction

which led to the original nuclear disaster which had destroyed the Earth before the Oankali arrived.

26. A similar preoccupation with abject, hybrid couplings also comes across in her other work, notably the acclaimed 1984 short story “Bloodchild”.

27. For example, in the marked resistance of human males to the blissful fusion with an alien starfish-being during coitus, or the transgenerational narrative which sees humans grappling with the hybridity and alien nature of their offspring. This trope of uncanny offspring was already seen in the Strugatsky Brothers’ Roadside Picnic where the relationship of ‘Monkey,’ Burbdridge’s mutant daughter, is a brief but seminal trope, also later picked up on in Andrei Tarkovsky’ s rendition of Stalker. For a reflection on this theme as an explicitly feminist trope see: Renata Lis, “The Stalker’s Daughter: Tarkovsky’s Women,” PrzeKrój, 30 May 2020 (accessed 4 October, 2023), <https://przekroj.pl/en/society/the-stalkersdaughter-renata-lis>.

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